

State Technical Committee Meeting

9/14/2016

9:30am – 11:30pm

The Nature Conservancy
22 Bridge Street, 4th Floor
Concord, NH 03301

Meeting Called By: ***Rick Ellsmore, NH NRCS***

Type of meeting: **State Technical Committee**

Facilitator: ***Rob McAfee, NH NRCS***

Note takers: ***Betty Anderson, NRCS and
Antoine Stuppard, NRCS***

Attendees:

Robert McAfee, Donald Keirstead, Rachael Phillips-Barnes, Betty Anderson, Daimon Meeh, Stephen Walker, Jack Savage, Cara Cargill, Sarah Holmes, Matthew Flanders, Bill Bennett, Aseeb Niazi, John Hodsdon, Pam Gilbert, Peg Merrens, Gary Peters, Edna Feighner, Peter Beringer, Andrew Madison, David Patrick, George Hamilton, Tim Fleury, Rick Cook, Rob Larocque, Linda Brownson, Stacy Luke, Bruce Cilley, Marilyn Milne, Kira Jacobs, Lorraine Merrill

Meeting Minutes

Agenda Item: Welcome, Introductions, and Partner Updates

Rob McAfee, Acting State Con opened the meeting

- Gave a short review of his background
- Will be a relatively short detail for him to NH
- Looking forward to working with folks in NH

Introductions of NRCS folks: Don Keirstead, Rachael Phillips-Barnes, Daimon Meeh, Antoine Stuppard and Betty Anderson

Partner Introductions with Some Updates

Bruce Cilley: State Exec Dir, Farm Service Agency (speaking later and will give update then)

Stacy Luke – Merrimack County Conservation District, District Manager

Linda Brownson, NHACD President, Grafton County Conservation District Supervisor (also speaking later and will give update then)

Rob Larocque, Carter Hill orchard and Merrimack Conservation District Supervisor

Rich Cook, NH Fish and Game

George Hamilton, UNHCE Field Specialist

- Looking for new people – 6 openings in Ag area with UNHCE
- Finished strategic plan: develop needs assessment working with partners and Ag. Community
- Working with FSA helping with drought assistant

Tim Fleury, UNHCE

- Forestry staff: has 2 vacancies

Sarah Holmes, Senator Shaheen's Office

- Working with Dairy producers to see what can be done in DC to provide relief. Loans are not the answer anymore.

Matt Flanders, Senator Ayotte's Office

- Senator went to a meat and dairy farm in Epping recently
- Sent a letter to Vilsack asking him to visit NH to hear NH's problems

Bill Bennett, U.S. Fish and Wildlife

- Pollinators and monarchs are priorities
- Schoolyard habitat projects

Aseeb Niazi, Congresswoman Kuster's Office

- Working with drought issue, held meeting in Claremont with over 50 dairy farmers to find the best solution for them.
- Also sent letter to Vilsack asking for emergency funding
- Possible solution would be to lower the feed cost

John Hodsdon, Belknap County Conservation District Supervisor

Pam Gilbert: Grafton County Conservation District, District Manager

- Fall tour of conservation practices September 29th
- Cover crop meeting in early Nov.

Gary Peters, Grafton County Conservation District Supervisor

Edna Feighner, NH Department of Historical Resources

Peter Beringer, US Forest Service

Andrew Madison, Granite State Rural Water Association

Peg Merrens: Upper Valley Land Trust

- Closed on an NRCS ACEP project in Cornish, NH. Edgewater farm.
- Another project is in the works at Haynes Dairy in Claremont. Also an NRCS-funded easement.
- They are getting going on Black Mtn. Farm in Haverhill, NH and hope to close on that in 2017. Also NRCS funded.

David Patrick: The Nature Conservancy

Partnered with the NRCS on a watershed RCPP Agreement:

- Protecting underdeveloped farmland
- Great Bay water quality
- Oyster restoration

Cara Cargill, NH Ag Mediation

- If any farmers are struggling and need mediation, please refer them to her.

Jack Savage: SPNHF

- Powder major forest project: fee acquisition and easement on Ag. Lands from a variety of funding sources

Steven Walker: Office of Energy and Planning

Lorraine Merrill: NH Commissioner of Agriculture

- Legislative commission is developing a land Ag conservation plan
- There is interest in funding the Agricultural Lands Conservation program again (first created in 1980 but not funded in many years)
- Chair is Senator Martha Fuller Clark, with Jeannie McIntire from land trust community, and others.

NRCS Update – Rob McAfee (Presentation on website)

NRCS is not an emergency response agency so we don't have short term programs to help with drought assistance.

Review of 2016 programs:

- EQIP: \$4.3 M obligated in fiscal year 2016 – 99% of the funds that came to the state
 - great work by staff and partners
 - impressive because of staff shortages taking longer to fill due to administrative transformation
 - 25% less staff
 - speaks well to the partners and NRCS “can do” attitude
 - For FY 2017, we are working hard to fill positions and implement the contracts
 - Cropland, Forestry, Farmland and Grazing: about ½ of the funding goes into those “big 4” areas
 - There is \$1.3M in backlog of projects (285): speaks a lot for conservation planning and interest in NRCS programs in the state
 - There is a limited amount of EQIP that comes to every state, so there need to be more ways to address the backlog, like RCPP. Rob thanked the partners who are working with us through RCPP
 - encouraged the group to come forward with ideas for RCPP projects
- AMA: Risk Management program, fairly small in NH. 4 contracts funded for \$25,000
- CSP: Acreage program, not obligating dollars, 2,442 acres in non-industrial forestland and 80.9 in Ag land. There is a re-tooling of this program coming to improve the program. It has received a complete overhaul that will be rolled out this fall.
- RCPP: Existing 2 Agreements:
 - Tin Mountain, 1 contract for \$154,334
 - The Nature Conservancy: 6 contracts for \$112,921 with a little left over for some more contracts
 - Easement Programs – ACEP
 - 2016: \$7.6 M obligated this year. This is more than the initial obligation. Because we had good projects ready, we got additional funding from DC. 8 contracts across NH
 - WRE: \$5.5: 10contracts for 1600 acres.

- Easement programs don't happen in a single year, so there were 2015 and 2014 agreements closing this year.
- WREP: Agreement with SELT for \$1.6 in the Salmon Falls and Merrimack Rivers Initiative. Habitat restoration for NEC and Blanding's Turtle. Partners: NH Fish and Game, Great Bay Resource Protection Partners and Merrimack Conservation Partnership
- A new RCPP proposal is going through the process to get funding for riparian farmland
- Drought: NRCS doesn't have immediate fixes. We work on long-term solutions through soil health and energy and water use efficiency.

Changes for 2017:

- Dollars allocated will be similar
- Likely to get a Continuing Resolution from Congress
- No massive program changes proposed
- The Seasonal High Tunnel Program – in the past few years, we didn't have a dedicated funding pool in NH. The number of SHTs has decreased over the last 3 years because they were competing with cropland projects. 20 to 30 projects didn't get funded. So we propose to have a funding source just for those projects.
- Changes for the CSP Program – Rob encouraged folks to give the program another try and gave highlights of the improvements saying the program will be managed a lot more like EQIP
- The first week of October, staff will be going to national training on CSP.
- NWQI: Was a project in NH, for FY 2017 that will be moved to another location in the northwest part of the state. Don Keirstead elaborated that it was in the Sugar River Area, but we've done as much work as we can there so we've moved it to the Clark Brook Watershed. There are 2 dam removals there as well as Ag BMPs, soil health, and cover crops. Will incorporate 6 to 8 watersheds in the Grafton County CT River area.

There will be a STC easement sub-committee meeting coming soon.

Robert.mcafee@md.usda.gov is Rob's email and his telephone number is 603-868-7581.

Two more ad hoc updates:

Don Keirstead: NRCS State Resource Conservationist

- NRCS is in the process of hiring a new biologist with the support of NH Fish and Game.
- We are hoping to continue the partnership with the Forest Service for the Two Chief's Initiative; we will put in a proposal for more funds.

Kira Jacobs: EPA Drinking Water Program:

- Working on LI Sound/CT River RCPP:
 - resiliency, soil health, land conservation
 - had an RFP over the summer for land conservation
 - All five states in NE but Maine, and NY
 - Sept. 27th steering committee meeting
- Appreciates that the NWQI will be in Grafton County because there are funds available through the NRCS Healthy Forest Reserve Program. In response to a question about using ALE for the program,

Don Keirstead elaborated that the HFRP can be used where ALE and WRE cannot. It was suggested that ALE might work for another RCPP.

- She said November 16th in Nashua, Chief Weller will be speaking.

Rob McAfee encouraged RCPP projects submittals with multiple partners across multiple states.

FSA Update: Bruce Cilley (Presentation on website)

- With the Farm Bill expiring, there are 2 employees who will be leaving. They have requested two full time employees and will receive 1 full time and 1 temporary to keep the staffing at the same level.
- Linda Grames is retiring at the end of the year. He hopes to hire someone to work with her for a few months.
- Drought: extreme drought in SE NH area. We are now up to 14 farms in NH that are dry. Some other parts of the state have farms that are dry.

FSA Drought Assistance Programs: Marilyn Milne (Presentation on website)

- Passed out a fact sheet of disaster assistance programs.
- Secretarial Disaster Designations get the ball rolling on these programs in a lot of cases.
 - Sec Ag. designates the county as a disaster area to allow for emergency loans and acts as an eligibility trigger for other programs
 - Typically requested by the Governor.
- Current designations:
Rockingham, Strafford, Merrimack and Hillsborough are Primary Counties and Cheshire, Sullivan, Grafton and Carroll are contiguous counties. Coos is the only county with no designation. All D3 counties were fast-tracked. Currently have a request in for Grafton. If that happens, Coos will become a contiguous county.
- US Drought Monitor is another tool to determine assistance. This is updated each Thursday. If any portion falls into the next level, the entire county is designated at that level. These conditions are expected to persist.
- Impact of drought:
 - reduced crop production and loss
 - lack of water
 - financial impacts
- FSA provides financial assistance through these programs for disasters like drought:
 - ECP: Emergency Conservation Program: water for livestock, etc.
 - ELAP: Water hauling provisions for livestock
 - LFP: Compensation for grazing losses for livestock on that that is pasture.
 - TAP: Financial assistance to orchardists and nursery tree growers
 - NAP: Financial assistance for non-insurable crops due to drought, but have to sign up before the crop year. Are accepting 2017 applications
 - EM: Emergency Loan program: available to recover from production and physical losses. Very low interest rate.

Rob Larocque commented FSA programs suggesting the requirements should be lowered. He wants Vilsack to give the dairy farmers 0% interest on loans now with easy qualification. With 4 or 5 bad years, a farmer won't qualify.

Cilley confirmed that they have received calls but not about Dairy farmers going out of business because of the drought. Rob said with hay costs going way up, it will get more serious.

George Hamilton: in 3 of 4 years, we've had a drought. It isn't a new occurrence. We are seeing a 15 to 20% decrease in consumer purchasing because they don't think there is product out there. Things ripened all at one time. Started in 2013.

Marilyn suggested that, even though people might not want a loan, please have people contact FSA because they are making connections to point people in the right direction for help.

Gary Peters brought up the respiratory problem in Grafton County. Cows are dying. Lorraine Merrill talked about the cattle respiratory disease in the CT River Valley. No recently reported cases. There are vaccinations for it. Vets have been communicating with their client herds. Also really important to follow bio-security practices between farms. There have also been a number of swine diseases as well. Need to be more careful.

Another gentleman spoke about increased freeze coupled with drought and wondering if FSA opportunities could be available by combining these events. Cilley said those conditions affect the drought monitor and that triggers the programs. George said we did get a declaration due to freeze in the orcharding industry. Some things alone might not cross a threshold, but together they might. Lorraine said we did have a declaration for the freeze for the tree fruit, but there was a lot of confusion because of multiple disaster declarations.

Lorraine said public perception is everything so we have to be careful about how we talk about these issues. She says it's hard and expensive for the farmers but they are making sure there is plenty of product available.

Lorraine Merrill's NH Department of Ag. Markets and Foods Update

Dairy Relief:

Drought and Dairy emergencies: This is a disaster situation and an emergency. Dairy farmers are running out of feed and it's the time when they should have the most feed. This afternoon Governor Hassan will see a completely empty bunker silo that should be mounded up. Farmers are already getting quotes from cattle dealers for their herds. We are working with our Congressional delegations. We really want the Secretary to do something for dairy. We also have a completely failed dairy safety net program. The payments don't even cover the premiums.

Dairy organizations asked the Secretary to buy cheese for food programs. He did a "sliver" of what was requested. She is hoping that, with a change in the fiscal year, there will be more money for that kind of purchase.

On the state front, there is a milk producers' emergency relief fund but it hasn't been funded. She is requesting funding for that program, but even if it succeeds in getting funded, payments won't happen until next summer. This won't be soon enough. She is seeking emergency funding for dairy, with a special provision for farmers in the severe and extreme drought impact areas, but this would require the state legislature to come back into session. This is a difficult task, but people are trying. This has the potential to change the landscape of agriculture in NH. We are already down from 120 to 101 dairy farms in NH.

In the last several years, those 120 dairy farms have generated 1/3 of our state's gross farm sales which shows a threat to the Ag infrastructure in the state because many farms and businesses rely on the importance of keeping the dairy farms in business.

NE, ME, MA, CT and VT have state programs that help or support dairy farms.

Land Conservation: This is a crucial time to be aware of easement programs that can save farms in the state. She also reinforced the availability of the mediation program.

Importance of Conservation Programs: Her own family farm is at ground zero for this drought and has had crop losses. But the corn crop, while the yield is off, is still remarkably good. Most of it was no-till this year, and all those years of crop rotation and cover crops are making a real difference.

Linda Brownson, NHACD Update (Presentation on website)

Long Island Sound RCPP: we are one of the six states participating and yesterday we had a big technical planning meeting with about 20 partners in Grafton County. All the partners talked about the role they could play and contribute as the program is a one to one match program.

Conservation Innovation Grant: Funded for the only CIG in the state this year to purchase cover crop rollers and evaluate the effectiveness of the practice. Many soil health scientists are excited about this piece of equipment. Just got approval on Friday.

NHACD Annual Meeting: is in Claremont October 13-14 this year and will focus on soil health: cover crop solutions. Steve Groft is the keynote speaker. There will also be a workshop on making cover crops pay.

Conservation District Resolution: Gave history of how conservation districts were created. There are approximately 3,000. They look for resolutions to adapt to changes. They are introduced by local conservation districts who introduce them to the state association, then to the national association who assigns a committee to do whatever is needed to implement the recommendation. This year we have a resolution relative to the drought. Resolutions are taken very seriously and needs to at least have regional impact.

Rob Larocque, Supervisor with the Merrimack County Conservation District: Spoke to the Conservation District proposed resolution. He owns Carter Hill Orchards in Concord. Thinks we should go back to having NRCS design and build ponds. Alleviating drought conditions needs to be done with overhead irrigation. Can tie this in with FSA to get a loan to build the pond. Irrigation ties in with everything, including production, so there would be an ability to pay the money back. Would like the rules loosely written.

Stacy Luke, Merrimack County Conservation District added: This is a draft and comments are welcome. AMA does allow for some funding of design, but AMA is not very well funded. Used to be funded under WHIP for other wildlife benefits. They kept the proposal simple by focusing on ponds because they work and provide other wildlife benefits.

Don Keirstead would like to form a committee to give a formal response of what we can and can't do. Will take a hard look at it. Stacy added that it's not just what can and can't be done, but what might be done in the future.

Don Keirstead, NRCS State Resource Conservationist: Conservation Innovation Grants (Presentation on website)

- Purpose of the program is to demonstrate technologies that may be known in other parts of the country that could work here. Designed as a demonstration program.
- Went over the requirements of the program.
- In March, we ask for a two page pre-proposal for grant funding. At that point we engage the discussion of how an agreement could work.
- Examples of projects:
 - Cheshire County Conservation District: Pollinators

- Xerces Society: Conservation bio-control – bringing in predator insects to reduce pests we don't want. We attract the pollinators into the high tunnel and keep pests in check. Also looking at ways to establish pollinators organically; i.e., smother crop to control the sod grass and then turn it into a pollinator plot, or solarization to kill the sod to prepare the site for seeding organically. Looking at cover crop mixes with pollinator benefits.
- NHACD purchase of no-till planters with rollers to make this more accessible to farmers in the state. Will increase soil organic matter, reduce weed pressure and herbicide use, and increase water holding capacity.
- UNHCE invasive plant dominance in naturally regenerated woodlots in NH. Looked at 534 openings between .1 and 11.1 acres. Noted that landscape setting is a better predictor of invasive plants than opening size. Looked at where there were more invasive plants in the state. In the North Country, getting the word out to recognize the plants before they get out of control, like in southern NE.
- Acoustic Bat Surveys: Investigating creating a bat plan for forest landowners who have property near a known hibernacula. Purchased acoustic bat detectors to collect data about the bats and understand what species of bats are there, how many, etc. This will help with planning for the landowners.
- No till seed drilling into pasture and hayland for rejuvenation. (Strafford Country Conservation District). Encourages important pasture grasses back into the system. Looks at different seed mixes.
- Aerway Equipment, Merrimack County Conservation District, reduces runoff, breaks up soil compaction, interseeder, incorporates manures.

Northern Pass Update: Jack Savage SPNHF

- Proposed transmission line from Windsor in Quebec into NH. Will create 40 miles of new transmission corridor. Will also use some existing transmission areas. 192 miles.
- SPNHF got involved because of the impact on conserved lands.
- Not a reliability project, this is elective because the companies want to do it.
- SPNHF think this is commercial development and that is prohibited on conserved lands.
- Key things that would need to happen:
 - Presidential permit by DOE (May issue final EIS early next year) EPA wrote to DOE saying this would have extraordinary impact and recommended against it. State Dept. of Environmental Services echoed this.
 - The SEC (state-wide planning board) is reviewing the application. They can issue a certificate, with conditions, or deny the certificate. There are a number of intervenors, like SPNHF.
 - Have been technical sessions where the intervenors can ask questions of the experts who are required to answer the questions.
 - Later this fall there is a deadline for submitting testimony.
 - Assuming there will be further delays

Open Discussion

- Bruce Cilley: Secretary of Ag is scheduled to be here October 17th talking about dairy situation and local foods: FSMA implementation and how USDA can help and small and medium sized meat system. Lorraine Merrill said she's not sure the Sec. Ag. Is coming. Bruce said he would confirm. FSIS will talk about small slaughter facilities. The meeting will be at the Audubon Center. Dairy in am, other in pm.
- Rob reinforced that the speaker for the NHACD annual meeting is excellent.
- Rob said he's impressed with the state tech meeting and attendance. Felt it was exemplary.

Next State Technical Committee Meeting TBA

Hearing no further questions - adjourn 11:40

